DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 343 731 RC 018 457

AUTHOR Twining, Mary Arnold; Roark-Calnek, Sue
TITLE African Past: Migrant Present. A Guide to the Exhibition.
INSTITUTION BOCES Geneseo Migrant Center, Geneseo, NY.
SPONS AGENCY New York Council for the Humanities, NY.; New York State Council on the Arts, New York.
PUB DATE Sep 86
NOTE 21p.
PUB TYPE Historical Materials (060) -- Guides - Non-Classroom Use (055)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Art; *Blacks; *Cultural Activities; Handicrafts; *Migrant Workers; *Poetry; *Story Telling
IDENTIFIERS *Caribbean Americans

ABSTRACT

This exhibit guide describes an exhibition of African folk arts produced by seasonal migrant farmworkers in western New York State. Workers come from the American South, Haiti, Puerto Rico, and Jamaica. The exhibition pieces were collected through the BOCES Geneseo Migrant Center's Folk Arts Program and Creative Artists Migrant Program Services (CAMPS). It is organized into two sections that develop the theme of a continuing journey from African past to migrant present, as this journey is reflected in arts and artifacts. Section 1, "These Voices, These Faces," presents works by African American migrants using poetry and storytelling. Section 2, "The Journey Continues," presents works by immigrants from the Caribbean. Paintings, drawings, and artifacts communicate the memories of home and dreams for the future. The exhibition concludes with a videotape of Puerto Rican salsa music. The guide contains descriptions and some photographs of the following exhibition pieces: (1) baskets and brooms; (2) fishnets; (3) handwork; (4) kites; (5) painting and drawing; (6) poetry; (7) quilts; (8) sisal rope products; (9) tin lanterns; and (10) walking sticks. (KS)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

AFRICAN PAST: MIGRANT PRESENT

A Guide to the Exhibition

by

Mary Arnold Twining, Ph.D., Curator

Sue Roark-Calnek, Ph.D.

THESE VOICES, THESE FACES

THE JOURNEY CONTINUES -

"I had to leave home...
but I remember my people
and I will make it here!"

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

It is with a great sense of appreciation for their cooperation and lively interest that acknowledgement is given to the following:

The New York State Council on the Arts (Robert Baron, Director, Folk Arts Division) provided financial support for CAMPS programs leading to this exhibition, as did the New York Council for the Humanities and Poets & Writers, Inc.

Dr. Rose-Marie Chierici, Dr. E'len Koskoff, Dr. Sue Roark- Calnek and Dr. Mary Arnold Twining, served as consulting scholars for the Folk Arts Program.

John McCarthy, ably designed the exhibition. Debra Horan assisted with preparation and mounting of the exhibition pieces. Ray Mayo, Graphic Designer, at the SUNY-Geneseo Instructional Resources Center, prepared the catalog layout. The text of the catalog was co-authored by Dr. Mary Arnold Twining and Dr. Sue Roark-Calnek.

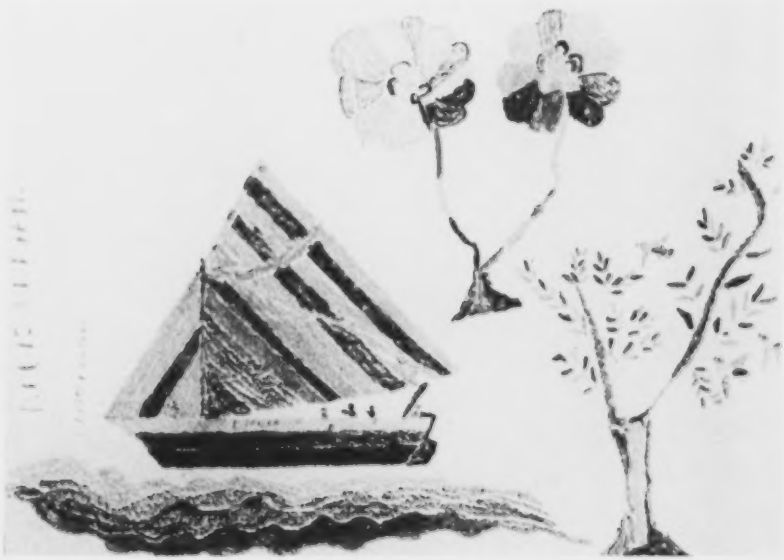
Sylvia Kelly, oversaw the development of the exhibition as Coordinator of the CAMPS program with BOCES Geneseo Migrant Center. Bob Lynch, Assistant Director of the BOCES Geneseo Migrant Center and Mary Fink, who assisted with the preparation of the catalog, provided indispensable aid.

Photographers for BOCES Geneseo Migrant Center programs, whose works appear in the exhibition, have included; Michael Greenlar, Elizabeth Boettger, Bill Cronin, and Roger Smith.

Particular gratitude is due Dr. Gloria Mattera, Director of the BOCES Geneseo Migrant Center, whose foresight and sense of humanity make possible this unique center and inspire the CAMPS Folk Arts Program.

Finally, acknowledgement and thanks must be given to the artists from Birds Eye, Case, East Koy, Green Bay, Hermitage Road, Hoehandle, Howard, Lyndonville, Moore, and Wells Camps, and all the workers on the East Coast migrant stream whose skills and talents are celebrated in this exhibition.

Mary Arnold Twining, Ph.D., Curator



INTRODUCTION

African-derived folk arts have existed since Africans were first brought to the Americas. In their hearts uprooted Africans carried images of their homeland, transmitting these images from generation to generation. The shapes and patterns of ritual objects and articles of daily use - cloths, fishnets, and baskets - were precious items of mental contraband. Dance and carvings reaffirmed the lost folkways, contributing to the stream of culture in the African Diaspora. African Americans have expressed their cultural tenacity by adapting old patterns to new materials and new needs, letting as much of their heritage shine forth as they dared.

> "I'm going to sing my song while I have the chance. I may not get that chance anymore." (traditional church song)

The pieces in this exhibition were produced by seasonal migrant farmworkers in Western New York State. Workers come from the American South, Haiti, Puerto Rico, and Jamaica. Some follow crops up the Eastern seaboard from Florida, harvesting New York's potatoes and apples in the fall; others process corn and beans. At the end of the season most return to their homebase communities.

These examples of migrant folk art were collected through the BOCES Geneseo Migrant Center's Folk Arts Program of CAMPS (Creative Artists Migrant Program Services), funded by a grant from the New York State Council on the Arts. CAMPS conducts a program of workshops in which workers share their talents, using materials to express memories of home or dreams of the future.

The works remind us that these migrant farmworkers share common roots, a journey begun long ago in the passage from Africa. But the journey continues. New Caribbean immigrants join Americans of African descent (Afro-Americans) on the migrant stream. Thus the art also reflects distinct histories and present-day circumstances. Like artists everywhere, their creations emerge from an inner vision that invests their world with meaning and value. As folk artists, they decorate their surroundings and comment upon their lives with both humor and hope. As migrant artists they must come to terms with the conditions of life on the road and in farm labor camps.

The items on display are made with locally obtained materials. They approximate what is available to artists in their home communities. Migrant farmworkers must travel light. They take materials as they find them and adapt their art to their changing environment. Poetry, storytelling, and song are forms well suited to travelling light. These arts too link migrants' past with their present and future.

Viewers of this exhibition will discover artists whose creative work draws on their collective African heritage, more recent histories of adaptation and change, and their own lively aesthetic sensibility. The artists themselves are not necessarily aware of these influences in their work. They often practice their art simply because they love it, or for pragmatic reasons such as making needed bed covers. This show will acquaint you with the outcomes of intercultural encounters of purpose, materials, and aesthetics developed along the continuum of artistic survival and self-expression among Africans in the Americas.

Mary Arnold Twining, Ph.D., Curator
African Past: Migrant Present

THE EXHIBITION

The exhibition is organized into two major sections. They develop the theme of a continuing journey from African past to migrant present, as this journey is reflected in arts and artifacts.

There are some differences in the forms of creative expression given emphasis by the ethnic groups on the migrant stream. The differences reflect each people's experience of the continuing journey - where they and their ancestors lived, how and when they joined the stream, and how they have adjusted to it.

Section I (THESE VOICES, THESE FACES) presents works by Afro- American migrants. As native speakers of English, these poets and storytellers seek principal creative expression in the verbal arts, which they use to describe their lives on the stream.

Section II (THE JOURNEY CONTINUES) presents works by immigrants from the Caribbean - Haiti, Jamaica, and Puerto Rico. Their journey continues, across frontiers that are political, cultural and linguistic. Paintings, drawings, and artifacts are prominent in Section II. Through visual images, speakers of Haitian Creole can communicate directly to us their memories of home and dreams for the future. These most recent immigrants also retain a wide range of traditional skills and crafts.

The exhibition concludes with a videotape of Puerto Rican *salsa* music. Migrants from Puerto Rico often find common ground and creative release in the familiar sounds of Afro-Caribbean music.

MIGRANT LIFE: AN INTRODUCTION

As you enter the exhibition, a montage of photographs presents an introduction to migrant life. These scenes and faces from the migrant stream need no accompanying text. Visual images communicate the flavor of farmworkers' lives.

THESE VOICES, THESE FACES

Here, twelve poems by Afro-Americans speak to us in spare, engagingly direct language about their lives and feelings. The ancient African tradition of wordsmithing finds powerful contemporary expression in these poems. More portraits of migrant farmworkers show their tenacious will to survive.

Americans of African descent have preserved traditional skills and crafts in rural communities. Makers of these brooms and the quilt recall watching older kinfolk produce similar objects. The carved walking sticks are the expression of an extraordinary creative sensibility working with traditional materials and forms. All the objects resonate with echoes of the African past.

THE JOURNEY CONTINUES

This section of the exhibition presents artwork and crafts from Caribbean immigrants. Their experience of the continuing journey may be summed up in the following:

> "I had to leave home - but I remember my people and the way it was, and I will make it here!"

Each phrase in this statement identifies a particular thematic concern in the work of these immigrant artists. Pieces are grouped according to the concern they most clearly express.

I HAD TO LEAVE HOME....

For Caribbean immigrants, the journey continues in passages from island homes to the mainland United States. In the late 1970s and early 1980s, large numbers of Haitian "boat people" made the dangerous crossing to Florida in small sailing boats, often at great risk to their lives. Many left their families behind.

The works in this section - drawings, paintings, and a model boat - recall the crossing. Their intricate detail speaks eloquently of its significance in the artists' lives.

For some Haitians, the boats may also symbolize Agwe, the god of the sea in the *Vodou* pantheon. In the context of *Vodou*, the image of the boat is a powerful invocation of protection by cosmic forces in an uncertain world.

The voices of Haitian immigrants describe the journey in their own words.

..BUT I REMEMBER MY PEOPLE AND THE WAY IT WAS...

Artifacts and artwork recreate images of home for migrant farm laborers from the Caribbean. The natural images - exuberant tropical foliage, flowers and birds - contrast sharply with their present environment.

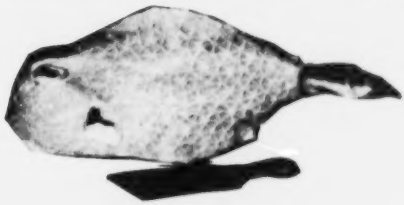
The peasant houses (in Haitian Creole, *kays*) shown are likewise very different from barracks or trailers in migrant camps. The representation of the *kay* may also evoke memories of family and friends left behind, and the immigrant's obligations to support or repay them for help in the crossing.

Baskets, kites, lanterns, and other craft objects recall traditional skills and their contexts of use in home communities.

Another boat under sail, with the picture of the fish and the net, here recalls that some Haitian immigrants were once fishermen.

A dried fish (*chaplin*) is a Puerto Rican folk instrument played as a rasp in the *salsa* music which reminds Puerto Rican workers of home.

The lion, by a Jamaican artist, echoes images in the Ras Tafari religion practiced by many in his homeland. In turn, Ras Tafari links its Caribbean followers directly with their African roots.



...AND I WILL MAKE IT HERE!

Haitian immigrants struggle to adjust to their new life in this country. A chance for shaping their future, to an extent not possible in Haiti, urges them on to work hard wherever they can find jobs. But the art in this section is notable for its disengagement from the present reality of migrant farm labor. Instead, artists record dreams of "making it," a better life for themselves and their families back home.

These dreams are recorded in modified tracings from the "wish book" - a Sears Roebuck catalog. The artists have embellished their tracings to create icons of domestic happiness and material success. A tin-roofed house with a chandelier represents "making it," in contrast with the thatch-roofed *kays* or peasant homes in the remembered countryside.

Remittances sent back to Haiti put money in the bank and tin roofs on houses. They also support families left behind, and may someday bring those families here. Haitian farmworkers dream of returning to Haiti themselves, no longer as "boat people" but as prosperous travelers who can afford an airplane ticket.

We can thus see a movement away from memories of the past toward the vision of another, perhaps brighter future, in the land of opportunity and make-believe. The folk arts of any people embody what *might be* as well as what *is* and what *was*. All migrant workers of African heritage share these dreams in some measure; all confront as well a difficult present.

RC 018457

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

☑ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.

☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

Sylvia Kelly

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

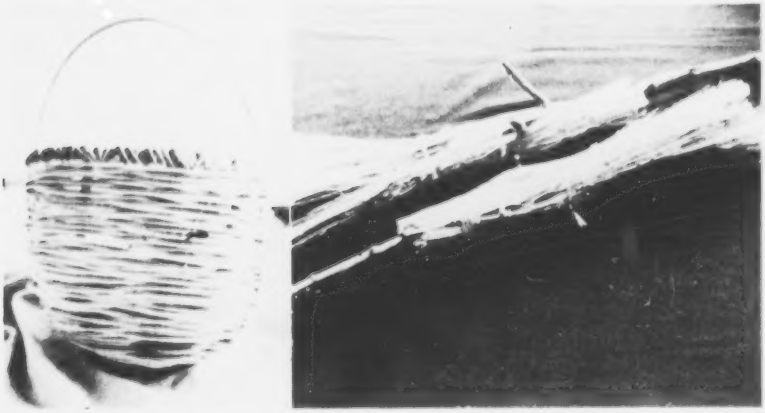
BEST COPY AVAILABLE

The continuing journey has taken African Americans from Africa to the Caribbean to Florida to New York State. The African past continues to nourish the present, providing historical grounding and thematic unity to the art of migrant farmworkers whatever their recent history. But new cultural adaptations have been made at each step of the journey. The art gives us a window on that marvelous flexibility which makes it possible to survive in ever-changing circumstances, as must each and every farmworker, each and every day.

As you leave the exhibition, you will see and hear a videotape of Puerto Rican *salsa* music. *Salsa's* complex Afro-Caribbean rhythms and wry, contemporary social commentary provide a final exemplification of these themes - continuity and change, African Past: Migrant Present.

EXHIBITION PIECES

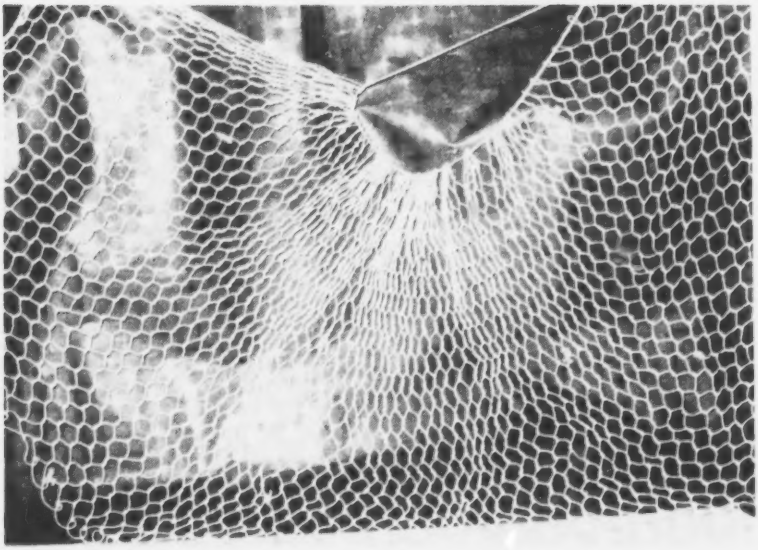
The pieces exhibited in the show represent a number of arts and crafts. Most have antecedents in the traditional arts of Africa. Their forms, materials, and uses also reflect adaptation to diverse natural and social environments in the Americas.



BASKETS AND BROOMS

Basketry is an ancient West African craft, still practiced on both sides of the Atlantic. One of the textile arts, basketry can be carried out with any pliable material. Palm, grasses, straw, banana leaves, corn husks and other natural fibers are used in most parts of the African world, including Haiti, Jamaica, Puerto Rico, and the Sea Islands of the American South.

Basketry and broom-making flourish in agricultural settings, as natural concomitants of growing and harvesting activities. Farming brings workers in contact with large amounts of fibrous garden waste materials from which baskets and brooms can be fashioned. In new environments, new design forms and materials are adapted.

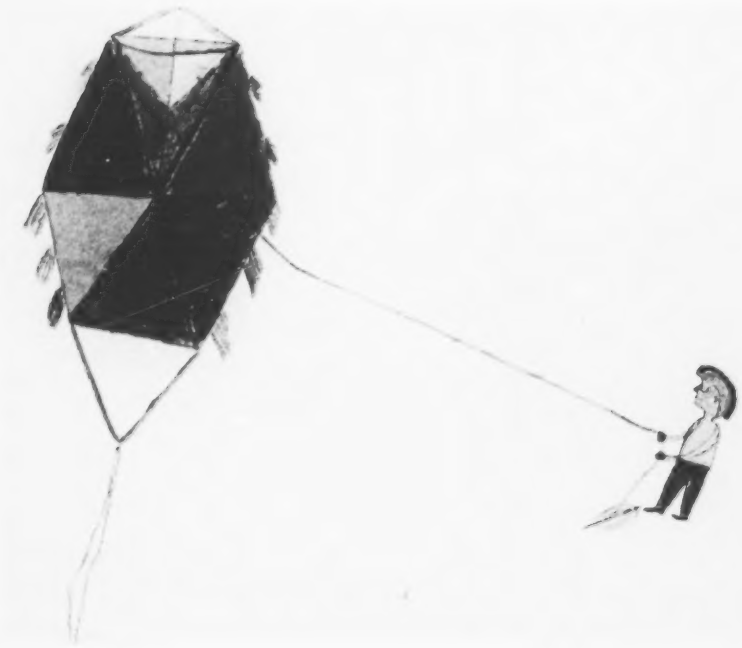


FISHNETS

Haitian fishnets are made of cotton twine which is manipulated by the maker with a plastic netting shuttle. The net is for catching fish of medium size. It is pulled through the water by fishermen at either end who walk along in the stream.

HANDWORK

Embroidery, crocheting, and knitting continue the tradition of pride in fine handwork, applied to the construction of decorative and useful objects. Haitian women embroider flowers and birds on cloths which have found a market outside their communities.



KITES

Kite making is another widely distributed craft with important social meaning. Haitian fathers make kites for their sons, who fly them in kite fights with other boys. Different weights of paper are used for large and small kites; struts are typically made of bamboo.

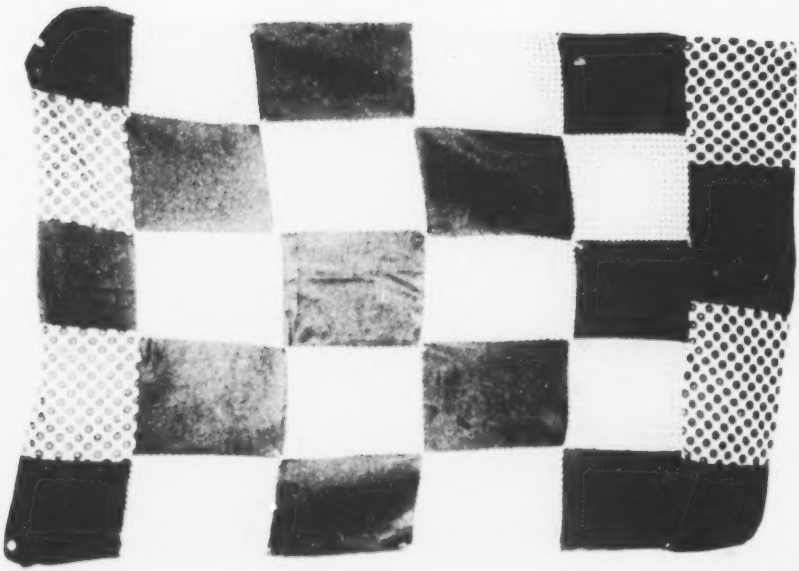
PAINTING AND DRAWING

Folk artists with no formal training paint things as they see or remember them. They are not greatly concerned with academic considerations of perspective or proportion. In their pictorial emphasis, some works are painted snapshots, reminding artists and viewers of interesting events or favorite occasions playing themselves out with charm and color. Like quilts, paintings thus serve as *aide-memoires:* decorative patterns made up of materials which recall beloved people and family experiences.

Haitian folk artists decorate the walls of homes and shrines with paintings. For these immigrants, paintings now function as records of remembered customs and scenes, as in the brilliant imaginings of tropical birds and flowers. Flowers, birds, houses, and boats recur in their works.

POETRY

The poems from Afro-American workers are like cups of water scooped from a running river, moments caught from a creative stream originating in the richly developed verbal arts of Africa. This stream now flows in everyday speech, storytelling, preaching, "scat," "raps," spirituals, and blues. Like the blues, these poems tell of the heartache of personal loss and broken dreams. They speak of work in sometimes sad, sometimes whimsical language. There emerges a common self-image, one of survivors able to endure through centuries of hard times. The poetry clearly says, "Today I must pick potatoes, but inside my heart dances."



QUILTS

Quilts have both practical and aesthetic significance for their makers. Quiltmaking is a salvage craft, making new use of old materials. It has a complex history in the American South. Traditional Afro-American quilts blend the layered warmth of European covers with top designs of African origin.

The Ewe and Ashanti peoples of modern-day Ghana have provided models for Afro-American strip quilts. Ghananian weavers have a mental catalogue of patterns for each of the rectangular sections or belts of the cloth. The last section may bear the name, "I have run out of ideas." When the belts are finished, they can be edge-sewn into larger cloths to be worn on ceremonial and grand occasions. Ashanti cloths tend toward brilliant reds, yellows, Kelly green, and sapphire blue; Ewe cloths show more subdued shades of dull green gray, gray-blue, and violet.

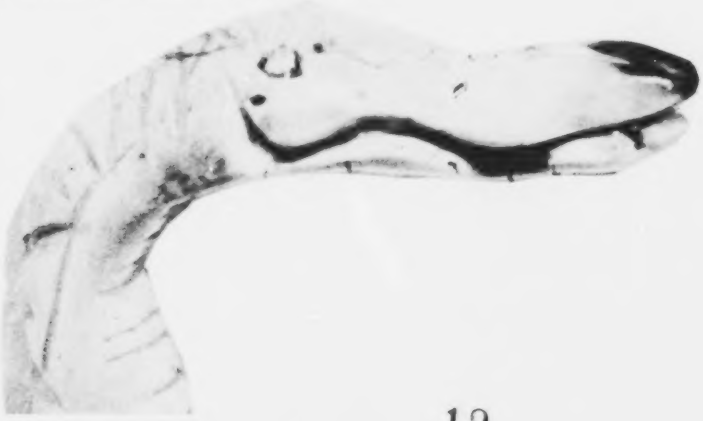
Belt weaving in West Africa is done by men on looms formed in part by the weavers' own bodies. In America, quiltmakers are women, charged with responsibility for keeping their families warm. They produce syncretic designs, using elements from European as well as African cultural streams. But the assembled materials communicate some continuity with orally transmitted heritage, serving as reminders of the African past.

SISAL ROPE PRODUCTS

In much of the Caribbean, sisal fiber is woven into rope for a variety of everyday uses. Halters for horses and donkeys recall the importance of these animals in rural farm work and transportation.

TIN LANTERNS

Tin lanterns exemplify another salvage craft in which old materials, such as cans or bottles, find new uses. In Haiti, lanterns figure in the ritual processions of *Rara* societies during Lent. They may also be used to light people's homes. Decorations are sometimes punched into the tin surface.



WALKING STICKS

The carved walking sticks echo African symbolism in their elegant serpentine forms. The carver's art is also adapted to his migrant life; he finds wood and carves it wherever he is.

BOCES GENESEO MIGRANT CENTER

The BOCES Geneseo Migrant Center, located in Western New York State, has provided a comprehensive program of educational, health, cultural, and recreational services to migrant farmworker families since 1968. The Center's total program, Project CHILD (Comprehensive Help for Individual Learning Differences) for infants through adults, was validated in 1973 as an exemplary program by the United States Office of Education and has been disseminated through the National Diffusion Network across the country as well as in Puerto Rico, Mexico and Canada.

Center staff have acted as advocates for migrant farmworkers by speaking on their behalf at the local, state, and national levels. The Center is currently coordinating for fourteen states a national Migrant Dropout Youth Program (MDYP) to identify and serve migrant dropout youth.

During migrant season, August - October, the Center operates a variety of direct service programs including Adult Basic Education and English As A Second Language Instruction, Health/Dental Program, and the Creative Artists Migrant Program (CAMPS), which provided the pieces for this exhibition.